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ABSTRACT

Northern Arizona University (NAU) and Nogales Unified School District established a school-university partnership in 1998 to prepare special education teachers to work in the rural Mexican border area of southern Santa Cruz County, Arizona. All 25 students in the program's first cohort were working adults from the local area, bilingual and already employed as teacher assistants or serving as volunteer teacher interns. The shortage of qualified elementary and special education teachers in the area was one factor leading to federal grant funding. The nontraditional program integrates individual courses into a 15-hour block of coursework per semester. Courses are taught in late afternoons by NAU faculty at a Nogales school and are enriched by resource specialists and guest speakers. A required supervised internship in an inclusive elementary classroom or a special education setting provides a valuable experiential component. Training sessions hosted by NAU faculty for mentors in the internship component foster a close working relationship among the parties. Although the program provides many opportunities for research, the demands of such a comprehensive program preclude efforts beyond the on-going evaluation. Because of the dedication of NAU facility and the continuing need for bilingual, special education teachers in the region, there is a positive outlook for institutionalization of the program. Steps in the program's implementation plan are listed. (TD)

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ED 429 775

SCHOOL-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION "*EN LA FRONTERA*": PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ON THE ARIZONA-MEXICO BORDER

This program description complements the conference presentation by faculty and students in our school-based partnership program for teacher preparation on the Arizona-Mexico Border. The program is based upon a partnership between Nogales Unified School District in Santa Cruz County, and Northern Arizona University (NAU). The following information is provided for educators who are interested in implementing similar field-based programs:

--Background information regarding program planning.
--Nature of the school-university partnership.
--Implementation plan.
--Distinctive features of the university curriculum.
--Personnel: NAU faculty, mentor teachers, and students.
--Prospects for the future.

Background Information

In 1996, dialog was begun between Dr. Ray Ver Velde, who was then Associate Executive Director of Educational Research and Services for the Center for Excellence in Education at NAU (CEE/NAU) and Dr. Raul Bejarano, Superintendent of Nogales Unified School District, regarding the establishment of a school-university partnership to prepare teachers for the rural, Arizona/Mexico border area in southern Santa Cruz County. The site is approximately 350 miles from the NAU main campus in Flagstaff, Arizona.

After a two-year period of working with local schools and with Pima Community College, the first cohort group of twenty-five students was recruited, advised, and prepared for admission to CEE's Teacher Education Program and NAU. Most of these students had been taking coursework at Pima Community College, Nogales Campus, for several years, hoping that a teacher education program would eventually come to the region, so they were admissible to NAU as first-semester juniors on the basis of transfer credits from the community college.

They began full-time studies in the five-semester program on January 6, 1998, gathering with their resident NAU project faculty, Drs. Ray and Peggy Ver Velde, in a classroom supplied by Nogales Schools. When they complete student teaching in Spring of the year 2000, they will be eligible for certification and a college degree in Elementary Education and Special Education.

RC 021925

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As the program began, CEE/NAU received a three-year grant funded by the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, providing resources for tuition, textbooks, materials, and other funding to directly support students. Our presence at the ACRES Conference is a tribute to this grant support.

Nature of the School/University Partnership

There are many interested parties supporting this initiative. In addition to the Nogales School District, the community of Nogales, Arizona, is involved, because all of the students come from the local area, or from Rio Rico and Patagonia--other small communities in southern Santa Cruz County. NAU's resident faculty also work closely with Pima Community College in Nogales and with NAU's Statewide Programs Office in Nogales to ensure that students earn the proper prerequisites for admission to NAU and CEE Teacher Education.

All of the students are employed as teacher assistants or serve as volunteer teacher interns in Nogales or nearby Santa Cruz County schools. They cannot leave home to attend college elsewhere because of family and financial constraints. These students represent a rich resource of expertise--bilingual, school-wise, and strongly motivated to become the skilled educators that this region needs. To underscore the partnership, the Superintendent of Nogales Schools met with students on the first day of class, reaffirming that there was almost unlimited opportunity for them to obtain teaching positions because of the shortage of qualified elementary and special education teachers in the area. This shortage was one of the factors leading to federal grant funding through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

Implementation Plan

Beginning in July of 1997, when the two NAU resident faculty moved from the NAU campus in Flagstaff to southern Santa Cruz County, an implementation plan was drawn which guided the project through its initial stages. These planning steps are included in this document because they may be relevant for other institutions seeking to establish school-based teacher education programs in areas that are far from the university campus setting.

--*Focus on students*: Recruit and advise students on an individual basis because each student has a unique background and situation.
--*Establish settings for school-based program*: This requires a strong and well-founded school/university partnership, based upon trust and mutual respect.
--*Provide inservice training for host schools and mentor teachers*: It is crucial that the school settings within which the teacher interns work allow them to take risks, try new strategies, and grow professionally.
--*Identify partnership opportunities within the community*: Cultural and service organizations, as well as businesses, can enrich the program with a variety of resources.
--*Establish close working relations with local community colleges*: Pima Community College branch campus in Nogales is vital for our program, offering a two-year program that complements the university program and providing advising for students who are planning to enter the program.
--*Initiate an evaluation component* : This must be aligned directly with the objectives of the program.
--*Seek funding to support and enrich the program*: School-based programs in remote areas need extra resources in terms of materials, supplies, and travel, and presentations by resource personnel with special expertise.

A formal program of coursework for the 25-student cohort group began in Spring of 1998. As of Fall, 1998, all implementation planning steps were complete, including a Summer workshop in leadership and teambuilding for mentor teachers and their student interns.

A Non-Traditional Curriculum in Elementary and Special Education

This five-semester program is non-traditional, in that it *integrates* at least 15 hours of coursework per semester. This means that each individual course is not taught in isolation, but is woven into a block of coursework in which there is no overlap or repetition.

Courses are scheduled for late afternoons, and taught by resident faculty and instructors from the NAU campus; Resource specialists and guest speakers enrich the course offerings with their expertise and enthusiasm for their topic.

In addition to attendance at lecture sessions, workshops, and seminars, each student is required to carry out a supervised internship each semester in an inclusive elementary classroom or a special education setting. For most students, this internship takes place in the course of their regular work as teacher assistants. For others, however, this requirement means that they must volunteer to work in classrooms in local schools. This school-based structure gives all students a chance to practice specific competencies and skills, as required by the Arizona Standards for Teacher Certification. The combination of coursework and daily application in the classroom makes this program highly efficient in terms of student learning and acquisition of teaching skills and abilities.

NAU resident faculty travel among eleven separate schools in three local school districts to visit the classrooms and workplaces of their student interns. When the NAU professors arrive at a school, they may find their student interns engaged in a great variety of activities, ranging from teaching reading to at-risk middle-schoolers to supervising learning centers in a first grade classroom. The experiential component of the program, woven throughout the integrated coursework, makes this a powerful program for our non-traditional students.

As of Spring semester, 1999, all students who began the program in January of 1998 are still in the program, thus keeping our original cohort group of 25 students intact. By Spring, 2000, they will be student teaching in elementary and special education settings. In May, 2000, they will have completed all teacher education coursework leading to a dual degree in elementary education (K-8) and cross-categorical special education (K-12).

Program Personnel: University Faculty, Mentor Teachers, and Student Interns.

The program succeeds because of collaboration and teamwork among the personnel involved in the project. Establishing these relationships is primarily the responsibility of the NAU project managers--the resident faculty who came to the region to implement the program in partnership with the Nogales School District.

Characteristics of University Faculty:

Because these individuals must build and maintain bridges between the university and the project, they need to know how to work within the institutional bureaucracy to solve problems for students and to keep the program on track.

This involves a thorough knowledge of teacher education curriculum, certification standards, and advising. In addition, resident faculty working in a remote site need credibility and connections with the home campus, in order to solve problems and overcome obstacles on behalf of students.

To assist them, they need visiting instructors from campus who also know how to work in this kind of setting. Teamwork and flexibility are key characteristics for those who would work in a field-based program.

However, getting along with the institution is only half of the equation. The partnership requires positive working relationships and strong credibility with the school district. Thus, university faculty need to become part of the school team, working with building administrators, teachers, and staff on a daily basis.

Most of our students are employed as teacher assistants in local schools. Because of the school-based nature of the program, they must also fulfill internship requirements, applying what they have learned in their university coursework in the context of their daily classroom work. This means that the university faculty/project directors must visit each student's classroom to observe his or her work, meet with their supervising mentor teacher, and maintain the close working relationships that make the program effective. As of Spring semester, 1999, we find our students in 11 schools, distributed among three school districts in southern Santa Cruz County: Nogales, Rio Rico, and Patagonia. In every school, we have been welcomed by building administrators, staff, and the all-important mentor teachers.

Mentor Teachers:

These professionals are key members of the project team. As supervising classroom teachers, they work with our student interns on a daily basis. In most cases, our students are employed as teacher assistants, although a few of them are working in other jobs and thus volunteer their time in the classroom in order to fulfill their internship assignments. Although this is the real world of the school, and their responsibilities are already heavy, the mentor teachers provide opportunities and encouragement for our student interns to practice the skills and abilities of teaching. They provide the all-important bridge between theory and practice for our students.

Since the project began, the NAU project faculty members have hosted two training sessions for our participating mentor teachers; a third workshop is planned for June, 1999. These in-service workshops engage mentors and student interns in an exploration of leadership and teamwork skills. Problems, issues, successes and triumphs are shared, building understanding and tolerance for the needs of everyone on the team.

Our close working relationships with the mentors are a real "plus" for the program and for our student interns. These teachers and supervisors are essential to the success of the program, providing our students with daily experiences and opportunities that make school-based teacher education effective.

The Student Cohort Group:

By the time they graduate in Spring, 2000, our 25-student cohort group will have been studying and working together for five semesters. They are all working adults, balancing full-time work, full-time study, and family responsibilities. Class sessions are usually three-hour marathons, held in the late-afternoon after everyone has been working all day. Patience, maturity, a sense of community, shared

purpose, motivation...all these hold our group together as the program progresses through the program (not to mention the snacks, coffee, and diet soda that we all share at the 5:00 break).

In addition to motivation and dedication, however, our students possess strong academic skills, including the ability to speak and write in English and Spanish. In many cases, they will be the first in their family to earn a college degree.

The program is competency-based, highly structured, and demanding, especially because it is a dual-major program for elementary and special education teachers. However, the students have, so far, shown remarkable endurance and resiliency, and a willingness to take risks and accept challenges. As one of our students reflected, "Just think, if we can all keep together, we will all be walking across the stage at NAU in Flagstaff in our caps and gowns in May of 2000!"

Prospects for the Future:

The program has a positive outlook for institutionalization. There are a variety of factors that contribute to this prospect:

--NAU's institutional commitment to serving rural, underserved areas of the state;
--The reputation of the Center for Excellence in Education as a teacher education institution with a strong interest in training minority teachers for rural areas;
--Continuing need for bilingual, special education teachers for the Arizona/Mexico border region;
--Teamwork with Pima Community College in preparing the next cohort of aspiring teachers for acceptance to NAU's teacher education program;
--Strong partnerships with schools in the region.

The combination of all these factors promises a strong future for this much-needed program to prepare special educators for the rural, Arizona/Mexico border region in southern Santa Cruz County.

Research Opportunities:

There are many facets of this program which provide rich opportunites for research:

--The impact of school-based teacher education programs on local schools;
--Effects upon the level of educational aspirations within the community;
--Practicality of school-based teacher education for rural areas;
--Documentation of teacher competencies in classroom settings;
--Characteristics of effective project faculty;
--Patterns of school-university partnerships.

All these topics provide interesting questions and raise important issues that should be pursued. However, it should also be mentioned that the demands upon project faculty in a comprehensive program of this nature preclude a great deal of time being spent in formal research and writing. Although program evaluation is on-going and necessary, leading to improvements and modifications in the project structure, there is little time for designing formal inquiry projects. For a new professor, trying to earn tenure and promotion via the traditional routes of research, teaching, and service, a project of this type can be a professional risk.

Unless a university chooses to offer additional staffing and support, this individual will find it very difficult to administer the program while engaging in considerable formal research and writing. A welcome alternative would be for an institution to honor the work of field-site project directors with

alternative types of recognition leading to tenure and promotion based upon the every-day action research and expertise that are an integral part of directing a successful program.

Summary:

Preparing high-quality professionals to serve children in rural schools is a challenge. Our school-based partnership program on the Arizona/Mexico border requires hard work, patience, and teamwork among individuals and institutions that are unaccustomed to working together--universities, schools, teachers, students, school-children, and parents.

Resources are scarce, and such things as stamps and duplicating paper become precious. The grant funding provided by the federal government, through the office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services has enriched this project with welcome and much-needed resources such as the mentor teacher workshops and resource presenters with outstanding expertise.

In addition to the rural setting, the program incorporates school-based teacher education, requiring that students translate theory into sound, practical, classroom instruction on a daily basis. They grow as professionals because of their own dedication and the support of their mentor teachers and university faculty (those who are in-residence here as well as those who come from the NAU campus in Flagstaff to share their expertise with us and our students). It is our belief , from the results of this project and other school-based, rural-and-remote programs, that this strong link with schools provides the most powerful foundation to prepare effective special educators.

Every day is a new experience in this real-world program. It is sometimes frustrating for project faculty and students when dealing with university bureaucracy and procedures from a great distance. Fortunately, our host schools and districts here on the border are welcoming, appreciative places, and our university student interns, their mentor teachers, and the administrators and children in the classrooms make it rewarding and worthwhile. A note from one of our students is tacked up on our office bulletin board. It explains a great deal about the power and promise of programs such as this one:

"Thank you so much for all the extra time you put in checking our applications...but most importantly for making our dreams of becoming teachers possible. To me, words are not enough; I have decided to express my gratitude by receiving my degree and making you proud of the work I do."

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